

EU and COVID-19: When a vaccine only adds to the trouble

April 11 2021, by Raf Casert



In this Oct. 22, 2020, file photo, health care workers transport a COVID-19 patient from an intensive care unit at a hospital in Kyjov to a hospital in Brno, Czech Republic. Lofty hopes that the crisis would encourage a new and tighter bloc to face a common challenge have given way to the reality of division: The pandemic has set member nation against member nation, and many capitals against the EU itself, as symbolized by the disjointed, virtual meetings leaders now hold. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek, File)

European Union leaders no longer meet around a common oval summit table to broker their famed compromises. Instead, each of the 27 watches the other heads of state or government with suspicion via a video screen that shows a mosaic of faraway capitals.

This is what COVID-19 has wrought.

Lofty hopes that the crisis would encourage a new and tighter bloc to face a common challenge have given way to the reality of division: The pandemic has set member nation against member nation, and many capitals against the EU itself, as symbolized by the disjointed, virtual meetings the leaders now hold.

Leaders fight over everything from virus passports to push tourism to the conditions for receiving pandemic aid. Perhaps worse, some attack the very structures the EU built to deal with the pandemic. Last month, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz decried how vaccine-buying in the bloc had become a "bazaar," alleging [poorer countries](#) struck out while the rich thrived.

"Internal political cohesion and respect for European values continue to be challenged in different corners of the Union," the European Policy Center said in a study one year after the pandemic swept from China and engulfed Europe.

In some places, there have been demands for political accountability.

In the Czech Republic on Wednesday, Prime Minister Andrej Babis fired his health minister, the third to be sacked during the pandemic in one of Europe's hardest-hit countries. Last week, Slovakia's government resigned over a secret deal to buy Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, and in Italy, Premier Giuseppe Conte was forced to resign over his handling of the economic fallout of the pandemic.



In this March 25, 2021, file photo, European Council President Charles Michel shown on a screen, center, speaks during a video conference of a EU summit projected at the Elysee Palace in Paris. European Union leaders no longer meet around a common oval summit table to broker their famed compromises. Instead, each of the 27 watches the others with suspicion via a video screen that shows a mosaic of faraway capitals. (AP Photo/Michel Euler, Pool, File)

But overall, political upheaval across the EU has been muted, considering that half a million people have died in the pandemic. At the EU level, there has been no serious call for the ouster of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the bloc's chief executive, despite her acknowledgment that serious mistakes were made.

It is clear that the EU has not risen to the occasion so far—and it's not clear if it can. The European Policy Center noted that "there is no immediate end in sight to the health crisis, not to mention the inevitable structural economic challenges."

The EU and its countries, of course, fell victim to some events beyond their control, as other nations around the globe did. Good arguments can be made that part of the the bloc's problems are due to delayed deliveries from Anglo-Swedish pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca. But some of the crisis was plainly self-inflicted.



In this March 24, 2021 file photo, a woman receives a dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, during a mass vaccination campaign at San Pedro Hospital, in Logrono, northern Spain. While some non-European Union nations were speeding ahead with emergency use authorizations for vaccines, the EU's drug

regulator moved more slowly—and hasn't caught up. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos, File)

The typical complaint is that there is no united EU health structure to tackle the pandemic and that largely health is still a national domain. But for years, the bloc has had a common drug regulator, the European Medicines Agency. And since last summer, the EU decided to pool vaccine purchases and spread them equitably among the 27 nations, big and small, richer and poorer.

But while some non-EU nations were speeding ahead with emergency use authorizations, the EMA moved more slowly, at least in part because it followed a process that was largely similar to the standard licensing procedure that would be granted to any new vaccine. The agency's first vaccine greenlight came some three weeks after one was OK'd in the United Kingdom—the first country to authorize a rigorously tested COVID-19 shot.

The bloc never caught up. On Friday, the U.K., for example, had given 46.85% of their citizens at least one dose, compared to 14.18% in the EU.



In this March 15, 2021, file photo, a nun wearing a face mask to curb the spread of COVID-19, walks past a closed shop in downtown Rome. Lofty hopes that the crisis would encourage a new and tighter bloc to face a common challenge have given way to the reality of division: The pandemic has set member nation against member nation, and many capitals against the EU itself, as symbolized by the disjointed, virtual meetings leaders now hold. In Italy, Premier Giuseppe Conte was forced to resign over his handling of the economic fallout of the pandemic. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino, File)

The EU also made the mistake of overly equating securing vaccines with getting shots in the arms—and underestimating the difficulties involved in mass producing and distributing such a delicate product. While EU negotiators were focusing on liability clauses in a contract, other nations were thinking about logistics and pushing for speed and volume.

And while nations like the United States were sealing their borders to vaccine exports, the EU took the high moral ground and kept exports flowing—to the extent that over the first quarter of the year almost as many doses left the bloc for third countries as were delivered to the clamoring EU member states.

On top of missteps with the vaccine rollout, the EU will be slow to disburse money from its 750 billion-euro (\$890 billion) rescue package, which will share debt and give out grants to poorer members in an unprecedented way. But bickering among leaders over some clauses and intricate rules have made it anything but a speedy process. What's worse, the German constitutional court could still torpedo or further delay the whole initiative.



In this Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021 file photo, doctor Anil Mehta gives the AstraZeneca vaccine to a homeless person at the homeless accommodation YMCA in Romford, east London. While some non-European Union nations were speeding ahead with emergency use authorizations for vaccines, the EU's drug regulator moved more slowly. The agency's first vaccine greenlight came some three weeks after one was OK'd in the United Kingdom. The bloc never caught up. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein, File)

The nature of the crisis may be different from past ones, but familiar obstacles arose: onerous bureaucracy, unnecessary delays as legalistic and technical disputes overshadowed the bigger picture, and bickering politicians putting self-interest before the common good.

This past week was a case in point. The EMA reiterated its advice for all member nations to stand together—this time to keep on using the AstraZeneca jabs for all adults despite a possible link to extremely rare cases of blood clotting.

Instead, hours after the announcement, Belgium went against that recommendation, barring AstraZeneca for citizens 55 and under, and others issued or kept similar restrictions.

"If government leaders don't trust the science, trust in vaccination is gone. If we don't rely on (the EMA), ANY common EU approach is doomed," said leading EU parliamentarian Guy Verhofstadt, normally the staunchest of EU backers.



In this March 17, 2021, file photo, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen gestures after participating in a media conference on the Commissions response to COVID-19 at EU headquarters in Brussels. COVID-19 has wrought division in the European Union. At the EU level, there has been no serious call for the ouster von der Leyen, despite her acknowledgment that serious mistakes were made. (John Thys, Pool via AP, File)

It is noteworthy that the EU nations insisted on delaying their vaccination drives in December specifically because they wanted to wait for the EMA's decision. But many have repeatedly ignored the EMA advice in the months since, setting more restrictions on vaccine use than the agency has called for.

This extreme hesitancy by many countries—in addition to often

seesawing advice—has become a hallmark of a vaccination rollout gone wrong. It has exacerbated the supply and issues of trust the bloc has faced.

With barely half of the doses that the EU had contracted for the first quarter delivered—105 million instead of 195 million—the video summit last month saw EU nations squabbling over shots and a distribution system that a few thought unfair.

Now there are expectations the EU can turn it around. It is hoping for 360 million shots this quarter—that would keep the promise alive to vaccinate 70% of adults by the end of summer in the bloc of 450 million inhabitants.



In this Nov. 24, 2020, file photo, a physiotherapist from the Belgian Army works with a patient with COVID-19 on breathing at the St. Michel Hospital in Brussels. Lofty hopes that the crisis would encourage a new and tighter bloc to face a common challenge have given way to the reality of division: The pandemic has set member nation against member nation, and many capitals against the EU itself, as symbolized by the disjointed, virtual meetings leaders now hold. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo, File)



In this March 17, 2021, file photo, Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz speaks to European Council President Charles Michel via a video conference meeting at the European Council building in Brussels. Leaders fight over everything from virus passports to push tourism to the conditions for receiving pandemic aid relief. Kurz decried how vaccine-buying in the bloc had become a "bazaar," alleging poorer countries struck out while the rich thrived. (John Thys, Pool via AP, File)



In this March 19, 2021, file photo, stacked chairs in front of a cafe during the coronavirus pandemic in Lille, northern France. Lofty hopes that the crisis would encourage a new and tighter bloc to face a common challenge have given way to the reality of division: The pandemic has set member nation against member nation, and many capitals against the EU itself, as symbolized by the disjointed, virtual meetings leaders now hold. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler, File)

In France, President Emmanuel Macron gave a glimmer of hope to millions when he said that a return to a semblance of normal life could perhaps come by mid-May when people could "reclaim our art de vivre embodied by our restaurants and our cafes that we love so much."

By then, EU leaders might even mingle in person again at summits that go through the night.

© 2021 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: EU and COVID-19: When a vaccine only adds to the trouble (2021, April 11) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-04-eu-covid-vaccine.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.